

THE
CARTER CENTER



Conflict Summary

December 21, 2017-January 10, 2018

Late 2017 brought a dramatic collapse of ISIS front lines in eastern Syria. With ISIS nearly expelled from the east, pro-government forces began to re-focus their attention on opposition-held areas in western Syria, making major gains in late December, continuing to present day. Government forces, along with the support of allied militias and Russian air power, have taken substantial ground in eastern Idlib and are within firing range of the Abu Thuhour airbase. In southern Syria, government forces succeeded in capturing all of the opposition-held Beit Jinn pocket near the Golan Heights following a reconciliation deal at the start of the year.

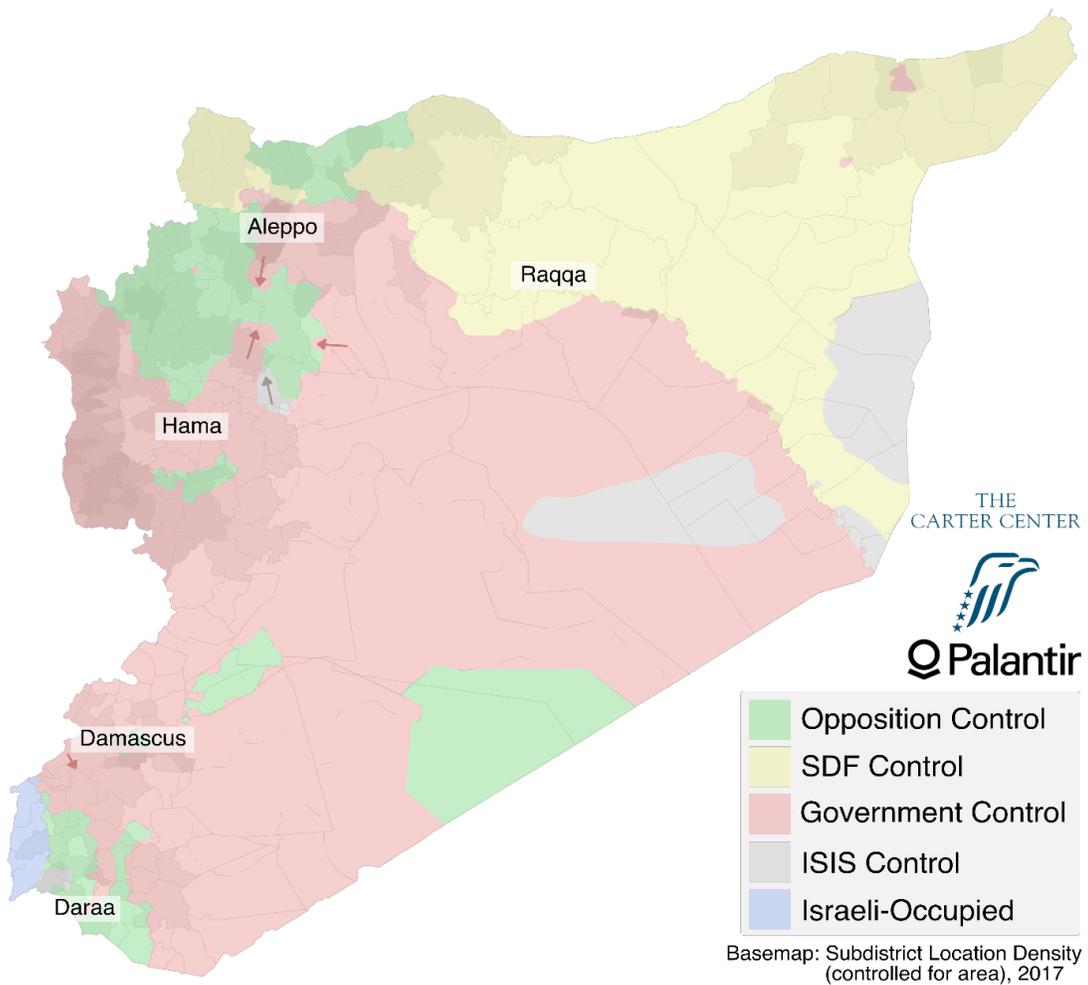


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of January 10, 2018. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period.

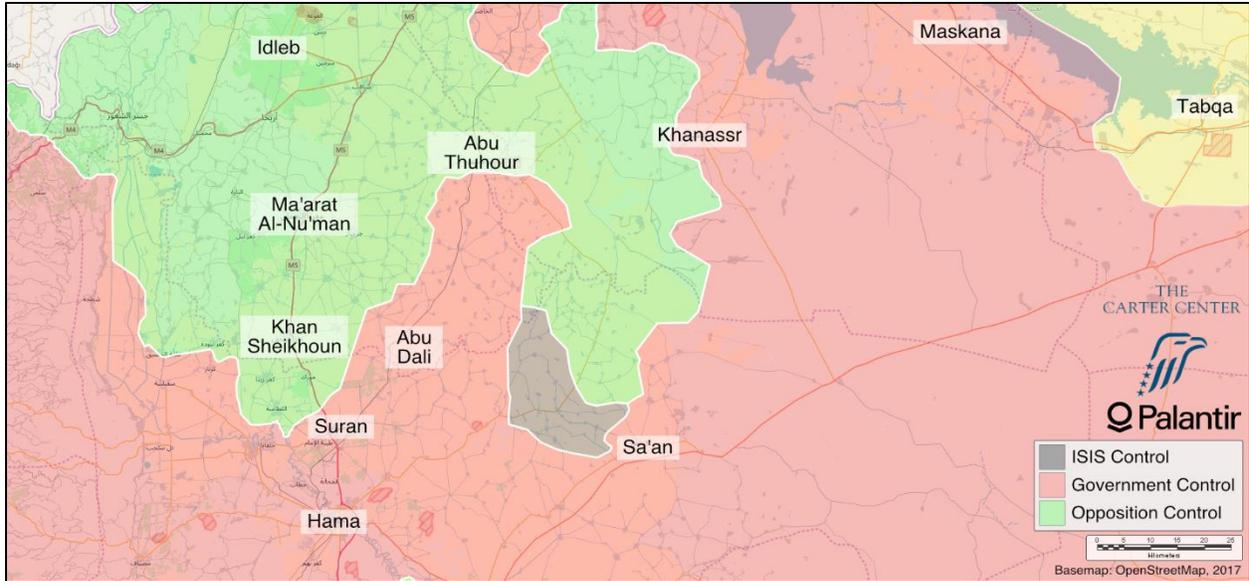


Figure 2 - Areas of control around the opposition-controlled Idleb pocket by January 10

Over the latter half of this assessment period, a long-simmering pro-government offensive into the opposition-controlled Idleb pocket is starting to make major gains for the first time. For weeks, the offensive, focused primarily on the area just east of Abu Dali, had not gained any ground for pro-government forces. By January 8, the advance had reached halfway to Abu Thuhour from the Abu Dali front, and by January 10, the offensive reached the locations just south and southeast of Abu Thuhour. Abu Thuhour contains an airbase and sits along a key transportation line between Aleppo and Hama. Pro-government forces also advanced towards Abu Thuhour from the eastern and northern fronts.

The advance has led to a mass exodus of civilians from eastern Idleb, who have moved west into Idleb and opposition-held portions of the Aleppo countryside. The Turkish government has asked Syria and its allies to halt the offensive and to adhere to previous de-escalation agreements. In response, the Syrian government has claimed that the offensive targets terrorist groups who are not party to prior agreements. Ahrar al-Sham released a statement asking for armed units to unite to defend frontlines from further pro-government advances, though given the failure of prior appeals made in late 2017, this recent call is unlikely to change the situation on the ground. Tribal leaders from the Idleb pocket released a statement condemning Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra) for withdrawing from battle with pro-government forces.

HTS units stationed on frontlines with the ISIS pocket in northern Hama also lost control of at least eight small towns to an ISIS offensive. There have been repeated reports of air strikes targeting HTS positions along front lines with ISIS, which likely contributed to the latter's advance.

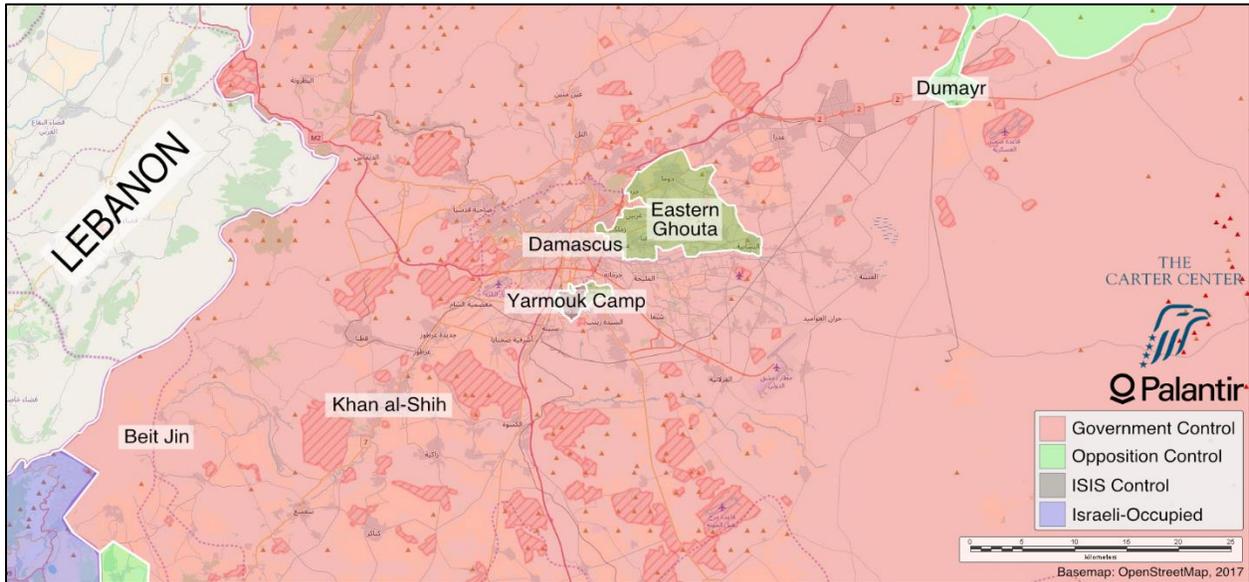


Figure 3 - Areas of control around Beit Jinn and Damascus by January 10

The long-besieged pocket of opposition control in Beit Jin southwest of Damascus is now under full government control. Opposition groups in the pocket reached a “reconciliation” deal with pro-government forces in the area on December 25. The deal, like many before it, was shaky, with low levels of conflict continuing into January before a full evacuation was brokered.

Fighting on the western fronts of opposition-held Eastern Ghouta remained fierce over this reporting period. Opposition forces on the northwestern Harasta fronts gained control over a few additional blocks and placed the Syrian military’s Vehicle Management Center under siege. Airstrikes throughout much of Eastern Ghouta have continued in force throughout this period, with two hospitals struck since December 31.

On December 9, Israeli jets struck an arms depot of a Syrian army base in al-Qutayfah, an area northwest of Dumayr. Four Israeli planes were involved in the strike and the aircraft flew through Lebanese airspace to conduct the attacks. Ground-to-ground missiles were also launched at the target after ground defenses targeted the warplanes. The strike came in conjunction with an Israeli statement about continuing weapons transfer to Hezbollah.

Hmeimem Airbase, the Russian base in northwestern Latakia, has suffered several attacks during this reporting period. Two Russian soldiers were killed in a mortar attack on the base at the beginning of January, which also damaged some equipment. The airbase is far from active frontlines, suggesting an infiltration of insurgent opposition groups. Less than a week later, thirteen small drones attacked the base. Russian forces destroyed seven of the drones and brought down the remaining six with an electronic response. No damage was caused by the drone attack, though its origins remain a mystery.